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THE PAN-AMERICAN CONFERENCE OF WOMEN

A Maryland woman conceived the noble idea of inviting the women of the other Americas to a Pan-American Conference which was to be held in connection with the third convention of the National League of Women Voters of the United States. Various Pan-American conferences of men had taken place but never had there been one of the women of the Americas, and therefore the successful outcome of this one, the first of its kind, was of especial interest.

The main purpose of the undertaking was that of increasing friendly relationships between the women of the United States and those of Central and South America, Mexico, Canada and the nearby islands.

In the autumn of 1921 official invitations were sent to all the countries of North and South America asking them to send delegates to this conference. Every country, with one exception, accepted the invitation through its diplomatic representative and the women of 22 American governments assembled to exchange ideas and to form friendships. There were in all 31 official delegates from the 22 countries, besides 22 other representatives of various women's organizations of these countries and many others who came as visitors purely through personal interest. In addition to these there was a group of Spanish-American students who were finishing their education in the United States. When the large number of women who came from Canada, and all those who represented the United States were added to the number of Spanish speaking guests the total amounted to about 1600 persons—an unexpectedly large and powerful gathering.

A brief description of some of the delegates will be interesting in order to show the importance which the foreign governments attached to this meeting of women. From Brazil was sent the intelligent and attractive Doña Berta Lutz, who is one of the most distinguished young women of her country and the first to occupy the position of secretary of the National Museum of Brazil. Her eloquent speeches in beautiful English won for her much admiration and applause. Venezuela did us the honor of sending the highly cultured and charming Señora de Quevara. Chile was represented by three delegates: of these the young and charming Srta. Mandujano was the leader. For five years Srta. Mandujano had been a student in the United

States and today she is a well known teacher and writer in Chile. She quite won the sympathy and praise of the entire assembly by her words, which were simple and serious but at the same time full of feeling and sentiment. From Mexico came five women in an official group under the leadership of Srta. Elena Torres. Srta. Torres is well known throughout her country on account of her educational and charitable work in behalf of the poor women and children of Mexico. The other delegates who accompanied her are also among the most progressive and advanced of Mexico, being each one a writer, teacher, or social worker.

From this short description of a few of the delegates one may realize that in this conference were assembled some of the most intelligent, best educated and progressive women of the three Americas.

In the sessions of the conference the following topics were discussed: child welfare, education, women in industry, and the civil and political status of women. The official delegate from each country was given the opportunity to speak on each topic and some of their reports were truly illuminating and at times surprising.

In this review only the most notable ideas of a few of these women can be reproduced, as it would be necessary to write a whole book in order to do justice to all of them.

In regard to child welfare all of the delegates manifested the greatest interest. Doña Lutz of Brazil said that children were of the first importance in her country but that up to the present time there were very few laws for their protection. Srta. Mandujano of Chile informed us that in her country they had just passed a compulsory education law which made it illegal for a child to work in a factory until he was 14 years of age. In Chile, as in many of the other Spanish-American countries, there had been established "La Gota de Leche"—a sort of free milk station—and in some schools free lunches were furnished for poor children. The lack and need of a central organization for the protection of children was emphasized. Sra. de Quirós of Costa Rica named a long list of organizations in her country which were working for the welfare of the children, and Sra. de Quevara described the advance made by Venezuela in works of a charitable nature.

Delegates from many of the Spanish-American countries spoke of the large families which are so common with them. The representative of Ecuador said that it was considered almost a dishonor there to have a family of less than six children, and in Colombia families of 12

to 14 children were said to be quite common. However, through lack of intelligent care the death of young children is a frequent occurrence and, in the opinion of these women, "fewer children, better cared for," would be a decided advantage for their countries.

Another topic of general interest was that of education. In Chile the compulsory education law is well enforced. In this country as in many countries with Spanish customs there is a general tendency toward the study of the professions. The majority of the young students wish to become either doctors or lawyers. Recently, however, there have been established a number of schools which offer practical courses and it is now quite the fashion for a young engaged woman to take courses in domestic science the year preceding her marriage. Obligatory service in the army of Chile does much in the way of educating the backwoodsmen of the country. Although in former times the majority of the advanced students went to Europe to finish their education, since the opening of the Panama canal, according to the delegate, the young people in great numbers are coming to the United States to study.

We were informed that in Costa Rica more is spent for education than for military or commercial purposes, or in fact for any other department of the government; and that the ambition of Costa Rica is to have her people one hundred per cent literate. These words were received with much applause.

What they are accomplishing in Mexico is almost marvelous. There is being waged a vigorous fight against illiteracy; the present government has appropriated millions of pesos for this work; a whole army of teachers are working under the direction of the government and many others are teaching voluntarily. There is also a system of traveling teachers who go on horseback from one village to another and wherever they find a group of Indians or peons who wish to learn they stop and teach them "the three r's." Exceedingly enthusiastic about her work was one of the delegates who was a teacher of this kind. Besides the traveling schools there have also been established libraries which pass from town to town. In addition to these educational measures social centers have been started where there are free movies for the poor and where free instruction is offered in music, an art for which the Mexicans show unusual appreciation and talent. While elementary education is being advanced higher education is not being neglected. The present educational movement in Mexico is not limited to the Mexican point of view but is planned

along broader Pan-American lines. Many students are being sent by the government to the United States to study, and in turn students from the United States are invited to come to the universities of Mexico.

In regard to the subject of the legal status of women in the Spanish-American countries, there were some statements which were very surprising. For example, according to the revelations of Sra. Vitale of Uruguay, this little country is the most advanced of all—even more so than the United States in this respect. Legislation there is exceedingly favorable to women and to the working classes. They have the law which forbids more than an eight-hour working day and which makes obligatory one day of rest each week. Seats or chairs must be furnished girls and women who work in factories or offices. All education is free, even in the most advanced schools and colleges. There is also a pension for the aged. Any person of 60 years of age may obtain this pension from the government by making application for it. Poorhouses do not exist in Uruguay because there is no real poverty there. Neither do they permit capital punishment; criminals are obliged to work or they may be sent to houses of correction. After hearing this description of the admirable conditions in Uruguay someone in the audience asked if these laws were man-made as in other countries. The señora answered, "We, the women, made them, or at least we inspired them, and the men put them into effect."

Conditions such as those in Uruguay are, however, the exception rather than the rule in Spanish-American countries. The delegate from Ecuador, for example, showed that the laws there are exceedingly severe and restrictive in regard to the privileges and rights of women.

The next topic for discussion was woman suffrage. Mrs. Catt, President of the International League of Women Voters, made the statement that this movement had begun in the northern countries and now had extended to such an extent that South America was the only one of all the continents in which the women had no say in the government. In not one of the South American countries do the women have the suffrage. However, judging from the speeches and the enthusiasm of the delegates, it will not be long before they obtain this right in some of the countries, as for example, in Uruguay and Brazil. It appeared that a sort of rivalry had sprung up between these two countries in their endeavor to be the first to gain this advanced step. Srta. Lutz, speaking of the situation in Brazil, said that the women

there did not desire the suffrage as a right but rather as a greater opportunity to help their country—especially the children and the poor women. In regard to suffrage in Chile, Srta. Mandujano said that they preferred to educate and prepare their women for political life before considering the vote, for, as she poetically stated, in order to construct a noble edifice it was necessary first to make the bricks, and they wanted their bricks to be of pure gold—the gold of education and understanding.

As a result of the speeches and the keen interest in the problems relating to the women of the Americas, Sra. Vitale of Uruguay proposed the formation of a great Pan-American alliance of women. The purpose of this organization is not that of winning the suffrage in the Spanish-American countries but that of awakening in women the realization of their duties to society and of educating them in the knowledge of the important part which they play in the life of mankind. But when once this is accomplished the vote will follow as a natural result.

The future rather than the present will tell what this conference of women has really accomplished. However, without doubt, it was one of the most important events which have ever taken place to help in combatting the ignorance and apathy which exist in the United States toward our neighbors of the south, and at the same time to destroy the false ideas which the Spanish-Americans have of the Yankees.

Mrs. Bowen, the official delegate of the United States, said that the bonds of friendship and mutual interest which were formed at this conference among the women of the United States and those of Spanish America would be even more powerful in their influence than the Monroe Doctrine itself. And, as another delegate stated, the peace of the whole world may have been brought a little nearer realization by this Pan-American conference of women, for, as she stated, "when all the women agree, when they are friends, the men will not dare to start wars."

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